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John Ritson

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WINDOW PAINTINGS

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of Fine Arts in the College
of Fine and Applied Arts of the
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Submitted August 1 1969
Advisor Philip W. Bornarth

To my Father

WILLIAM A. RITSON

Associate of the Royal College of Art, London, England.

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Thesis Proposal Statement

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The purpose of the Thesis is to portray the moods created by people observed gazing through windows and to complete four or more such paintings in oil colors.

Procedure

Materials and Methods.

The technique employed in the Thesis Project, makes extensive use of oil glazes. In some instances, these films of color are applied over a fully chromatic underpainting; at other times the paint surface is constructed entirely from glazes.

The technique demands absolute cleanliness of brushes, palette and medium. There must be a reasonable surety in the choice of overlay of colors, since any fumbling or poor color selection, rapidly results in opacity and muddy coloring.

The amount of oil incorporated into the surface, is far greater than that used in direct painting techniques. In order to avoid yellowing and cracking, the paint film must be kept as thin as possible. For this reason, where corrections have to be made, they are accomplished by scraping with a sharp knife and cleaning with alcohol, until the original surface is recovered. Such cleaning requires a sturdy support and primer. I prefer the rigid surface of Masonite ⁽¹⁾ or alternately

(1) Masonite Corporation.

a strong smooth canvas, primed with a white acrylic paint. ⁽²⁾ I applied several coats, not only to build up the type of texture that I prefer, but also to build up a highly abrasion resistant surface. Panels prepared in this manner and used with glazes over the past ten years, have shown no deterioration or interfilm failure and would indicate a technically sound method of procedure.

Pigments.

I use a good grade of oil colors, setting up a limited palette based on the relative transparency of the pigments. Since most of the effects that I wish to achieve are of a transparent nature, preference is given to the following pigments, which only show their true hue when applied as glazes.

Ultramarine Blue, Phthalocyanine Blue, Phthalicyanine Green, Burnt Sienna, Raw Sienna, Alizarin Crimson. Where necessary, the following semi-transparent colors are added; Cadmium Red Light and Cadmium Yellow Light.

Painting Medium

The following mixture has proved to be stable and has shown no tendency to crack in paintings produced and observed over a ten year period.

(2) White Acrylic Latex House Paint. Glidden Coatings and Resins, Cleveland, Ohio, 44115.

- 60% Thermally treated Polymerized
Linseed Oil of Medium Viscosity. (3)
30% Concentrate of Damar Resin in
Turpentine.
10% Turpentine.
1 drop in 1/16 of a cup of the above
of Cobalt Linoleate Drier (4)
to be added as needed before
mixture is used.

Where it is necessary to varnish any part of the painting, this is done with the above medium. The film thus becomes continuous and dries at a more even rate than if varnishing were left to a later date and a different varnish were used.

Experiments have shown that the proportions given for the painting medium to be ideal for my purpose. A reduction in the percentages of Damar Varnish produces crawling and gathering when the medium is applied thickly. Where it is necessary to use opaque pigments during the course of glazing, some of the medium complete with driers is added to maintain the homogeneity of the paint film.

Technique.

The glaze may be applied in two ways, either by coating the surface to be painted with medium and then mixing the pigment directly into this, or

(3) Shiva Artists Colors: 10th and Monroe Streets, Paduca, K.Y.

(4) Utrecht Linens, Inc., 33 Thirty-Fifth St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11232

by mixing the glaze on the palette and applying it directly. The glaze may be manipulated by dropping a second color into it that has been diluted with turpentine and a small amount of oil. A variety of effects can be achieved in this manner using both transparent and opaque pigments. Where the glaze has been mixed to a thick enough consistency, it can be manipulated with the fingers or a knife. By varying the thickness of the glaze in this manner, it is possible to exploit the chroma of a color such as Alizarin Crimson, from the palest of tints to a red that is almost as low in tone as black, in one working.

*

Development of Concept.

'Design is pure abstraction; it has nothing whatever to do with the subject matter of the work. This is true whether the subject in it's finished state be realistically treated or painted in an abstract manner. This abstract structure of a picture is it's theme; the thing represented is it's idea,.....' (5)

"The one certainty is that no painting, ancient or modern, has achieved significance that does not contain in it's internal structure, the elements of abstract order." (6)

On the 14th century Japanese painter Kao -
"His paintings are distinguished by Zen inspired symbolism, which gives as much, if not more significance to what is not, as what is represented." (7)

(5) Ernest W. Watson. Composition (Watson Guptill Publications Inc.: New York 1964). p.7.

(6) Erle Loran. Cezanne's Composition. (University of California).

(7) Yakio Yashiro. 2,000 years of Japanese Art. (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; New York.) p.181.

Research.

The window is virtually a plane of projection, upon which can be traced the images of objects that lie behind it. These images are subject, not only to the laws of refraction of the glass itself, but also to the imperfections in the reflecting surface. In addition to this, there is the added complication of the reflective nature of the surface, in which the virtual image viewed in front of the glass is seen in reverse, but equal depth within the mirror image. The final visual effect is compounded of reflected space superimposed on actual space, with the glass remaining an intermediate autonomous surface. It is a process of selection that creates its own theme and gives significance to what is not seen.

The effects produced by this set of conditions has it's equivalent in several aspects of painting, for example, equivocal space. Fra Angelico made use of this phenomena in the fifteenth century. Tonal and color patterns become independent of the objects that they represent. A tone or color on a form may also suggest a valid meaning; in conjunction with some other tone or color off the form.

There is a constant change of meaning created by the changes of emphasis. In just the same way that the eye reinterprets the arbitrary spacial relationships projected to the plane of the glass, so the eye reinterprets the relationships of tone

conveyed in paintings, as equivocal space. It is this interplay, rather than the pictorial realizations, that becomes the point of interest in the painting.

Another phenomena found in reflective surfaces that has been exploited by the painters, is coincidentals. One of the leading exponents of this type of painting was Lyonel Feininger. Here the passage of light is expressed as a unifying force flowing over forms and binding them together into a unified whole. These coincidentals occur frequently in our environment and are emphasised by large blocks of reflected tone in the windows.

Window surfaces present a fragmented view of the world compounded by the fragmented nature of our surroundings. Within this setting, man appears as a disjointed spectator, his guards down, revealing a wistful perplexity. Things become superimposed with a different logic that is reminiscent of the Surrealist Movement and the paintings of Picasso. There is a surrealist point of view built into the surface. One world on the surface, another beyond and yet another that flits between the two.

Involvement with this world of shifting light patterns and spacial relationships, is only broken when the mundane world reasserts itself in the form of a window frame, a brick surround or a figure gazing at a world he may not enter.

Part of the charm and interest in such a surface is the ambiguity and resultant diversity of interpretation. As with a good piece of poetry, there is the demand that the viewer adds an extra dimension arising from his own experiences.

Our visual world is entirely dependent upon the reflection of light from varying surfaces. Our world of color is dependent upon the absorbative nature of the materials that the light strikes. In this context all paintings have to do with reflection and transparency. The manner in which artists have reacted to the phenomena is infinite.

Titian and Reubens translated into pigment the dancing reflective lights on the human figure, which give to their paintings a feeling of life and vitality. Jan Van Eyck and his Dutch contemporaries, delighting in surface qualities, producing faithful reproductions of light reflected from glass and silver. In more recent times Charles Burchfield in his painting Rainy Night has delighted in the light reflected in a rain washed pavement. Ambrose McEvoy, the English painter, in his paintings In a Mirror and The Ear-ring, captured all the wistfulness of people reflected in mirrors.

These are all direct and somewhat literal paintings of reflections. It is toward the more abstract qualities that I have directed my research.

I find these qualities in the work of Braque. He deals with many of the problems that I find

inherent in window transparency and reflection. In his painting Bottle, Glass and Pipe he structures his painting with transparencies which superimpose one object upon another. He isolates this one abstracted quality of transparency. The painting is relevant for me in one other respect. The painting deals not only with this abstract quality, but juxtaposes with it comparatively realistic forms. There is a multiplicity of viewpoint here that a window reflection provides.

"Great variations occur in the appearance of Cubist Paintings, but they are all in some degree distortions of the visible world and are not invented abstracts.... They do not conform to a single viewpoint.... " (8)

Gris, with his quieter nature, simpler and more direct than Braque, achieves in such paintings as Still Life in Front of an Open Window, a pictorial validity with the use of overlapping transparencies. There is an elaboration of surface within a careful balance of color and harmony that matches my own interests.

A contemporary artist much influenced by the example of Braque, both as a Cubist and as a technician is Afro. His painting Fondo degli Ulivi, although non-representational, I find is a useful reference for the manner in which he

(8) Trewin Copplestone. Modern Art Movements. The Colour Library of Art. Paul-Hamlin London. p.18.

structures light and color. The surface has subtle depth which he exploits for psychological and emotional reasons.

"Afro's art is actually an art of memory, of associations, of images tinged with psychic emotions." (9)

Windows provide the rationale for a similar association of images. I feel within his completely abstracted lights and forms, a direct relationship with my own interest and paintings.

It might reasonably be stated that for the painter, there is no specific point in time at which he commences to do research for a series of paintings. Everything that he does is part of this research. Each painting is part of the research for the one that follows. Specific research for this series has merely consisted of constantly reminding myself of what it is that I am trying to do, by looking often at the works of those who have done it supremely well.

Reflections can simplify and isolate the essence of a subject. My research here really started with Oriental Art and the great Exhibition of Chinese Art at the Royal Academy, London, in 1935. For the purpose of this series, I have kept before me a reproduction of a Japanese screen in two panels done by an Unknown Artist of the Muromachi Period,

(9) Nello Ponete. Contemporary Trends. Skira. p.87.

15th Century A.D., illustration number 1. This work was carried out with ink on paper. For this artist, technique was completely mastered, the essence of the subject matter completely felt and the activity of the artist transmitted. There is nothing included that should not be. There is no fumbling or fudging; it is painted with a clarity and sureness that I can only hope to emulate.

Illustration number 2 was chosen^{*} for some of the same reasons. A Tuscan Town by Ambrogio Lorenzetti about 1340. The painting is organized with a complete understanding of the elements of abstract order. There is a surety about what is important and something of the static tranquility often observed in reflective surfaces. There is a reminder for me in this painting, that the real values can always be achieved without trying or seeming to be clever.

Illustration number 3 Silence by Odilon Redon about 1911, again interests me for what it does not contain, as much as what it does. There is a dream like quality and ambiguity that I seek to make a part of my own work. In addition this painting deals with equivocal space and tonal qualities that are so much a part of the reflective surface.

Morris Davidson's Still Life with Fish, Illustration number 4, was chosen simply for this one quality. I am fascinated with it as a child is fascinated with a puzzle. I enjoy the process of taking apart and putting together again. It is the

old game of finding animals in clouds. Every painting should be a little like a cloud.

I chose Turner's Steamer in a Snow Storm Illustration number 4, because he understood the essence of things and for the skill with which he could conjure up light from pigment. In this painting, light is made to dance and reflect in such a manner that it becomes as much the subject of the painting as the steamer and the sea. In window reflections, this suggests a whole series of paintings.

The final illustration number 6, is by Pablo Picasso of Ambroise Vollard 1910. Although the artist's intent was so different from my own, I find solutions to my own problems in handling the fragmented world of people and their surroundings as reflected in and observed through windows. Here again is the ambiguity, the sense of equivocal space and the passage of light.

I have not included an example from the Impressionistic school, not because they have nothing to offer me in considering my project, but because I have always been alienated by their primary intention. I am not so much interested in the freezing of the passing moment, so much as trying to perceive the passing of one moment into the next.

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Painting I - The Funeral.

The old man watches the proceedings, while his wife just sits.

This subject lends itself admirably to interpretation using reflections, since the people are seen slightly removed from a life they will shortly leave altogether.

Having conceived of the idea, the next problem was to find a means of expressing it in sufficiently generalized terms. I wished to avoid delineating the architectural setting too clearly. I preferred to suggest it by the use of texture. This I built up with modelling paste and matt areas, which would contrast with the glazed surfaces.

By segmenting the images, it was possible to suggest an almost sequential time span, an effect that may in fact be observed in window reflections.

As the painting progressed, it became difficult to hold the elaborate and highly colored glazed areas within the desired spacial context. This was corrected in the case of the woman, by drawing together the colors and broken areas with an additional cool glaze.

In the case of the man, it was necessary to

reduce the image by extensive scraping, reducing most of the emphasis to the drawing of the shadow areas on the right hand side of the face.

Thin cold glazes applied over the scraped area, pushed the image behind the reflective surface of the glass and allowed the suggestion of architecture to stand more strongly.

Painting II - Cold Water Flat.

This painting was conceived as a set of window panes, through which different aspects of the same situation were to be viewed or reflected.

The method of dealing with the problem of architecture was essentially the same as that employed in The Funeral, using three levels of painting, textured, matt and gloss for the reflective surfaces.

The panes in which only reflections occur were first of all given a coating of glazing medium.

Colors were mixed with medium on the palette and applied with a great deal of pressure, using a flat sable brush. The displacement of the glaze opened up wide tonal and chromatic variations.

The two figures were underpainted using conventional oil painting procedure. Cobalt Linoleate drier was added to the white paint on the palette so that all colors mixed with it would dry at an even rate.

When this underpainting was dry enough, in approximately two hours, it was glazed using warm and cold glazes.

Finally the lights on the background and figures were worked one into the other with opaque paint applied into the glaze.

All phases of the painting were achieved very directly and cleanly with no major corrections or overpainting.

Painting III - The Game.

The glazing technique provides the means for highly elaborating the surface of a painting and creating a jewel like quality.

The Game was painted from a desire to leave out all but the essence of the subject matter and to achieve the final result with as little tonal change as possible.

The broad reflective band and figures were originally painted with glazes mixed on the palette. When it became obvious that these were becoming too heavy and elaborate, the entire area was reworked by wiping with a cotton cloth over the figures, much in the manner of finger painting.

The architecture was left untouched. It was finally decided to leave this one area of tonal contrast and create an asymmetrical balance between this and much larger areas of weaker tones.

The painting was completed by adjusting the wiped areas and applying the partly seen Venetian blind behind the glass.

I did not add anything to the remaining areas of the canvas, since the painted edges seem to give them enough validity. Any increase in color or pictorial interest in these areas, would have meant a corresponding increase in emphasis in others to maintain the required balance.

Painting IV - Wet Afternoon.

I conceived this painting as another exercise in planned omission and directness of execution; the Sheng-tung of Chinese painting. (10)

The composition was based on two aspects of window reflections; the banding that results from irregularities in the surface and refraction.

Most of the painting was achieved by manipulation of the application of the initial glaze. In some areas this was undertaken with a painting knife, in others a second or identical color was injected thinned with turpentine and a trace of painting medium.

The negative areas were finally given a cold or warm chromatic value by glazing.

(10) Shu-Chi Chang. Painting in the Chinese Manner. The Viking Press. New York. p.19.

Painting V - The Mission.

This painting was an attempt to deal with more of the complexities of the reflective surface than was attempted in other paintings of the series.

One section of a much larger store front Mission window was isolated.

The final painting conforms very closely to color and tonal roughs that were prepared in some detail. The roughs were transferred to the canvas by squaring. This was the only painting in which this technique was used.

When the painting was half completed, an attempt was made to change the structure by introducing architectural details. I felt that this destroyed, to a great extent, the autonomy of the reflective surface.

The painting was cleaned by the application of alcohol and scraping, until only the original glazes faintly remained. The images were then rebuilt using glazes and a minimum of opaque pigment.

The resultant color scheme was less intense than I had intended, but better expressed the drabness associated with this form of religion.

Painting VI - Garden Window.

This painting was an attempt to make a generalized statement about the superimposition of a reflection on background viewed through the prismatic surface of wet glass.

The whole canvas was given a chromatic texture by splattering with pigment diluted with turpentine. The figure was painted by transparentizing the flesh tones with glazing medium, so that the underlying textures worked their way through.

The same technique was used for the suggestion of curtaining and architectural form.

The parts of the texture that were to be left, were given a coat of glazing medium.

Painting VII - Commercial.

There is nothing new about poverty, except that today the poor are asked to measure themselves against the affluent every fifteen minutes.

The present painting is a synthesis of many roughs, each one a simplification of the previous one. I omitted references to television or advertising media, preferring to catch an unencumbered wistfulness.

This painting was satisfying to produce, since the conception and general composition were already well established and could be put down with a maximum of surety and directness.

Conclusion

The more I paint, the more I wish I could say with one stroke, what now takes me many.

For me the most satisfying paintings are those which flow onto the canvas with simple directness and clarity.

The best paintings are created when skills and techniques no longer require thought and when all thinking about subject has long since been completed.

A painting ideally should be a painless birth, for which the artist has been so conditioned, that the work takes place almost without his volition, capturing more of feeling and less of intellect, than he ever intended.

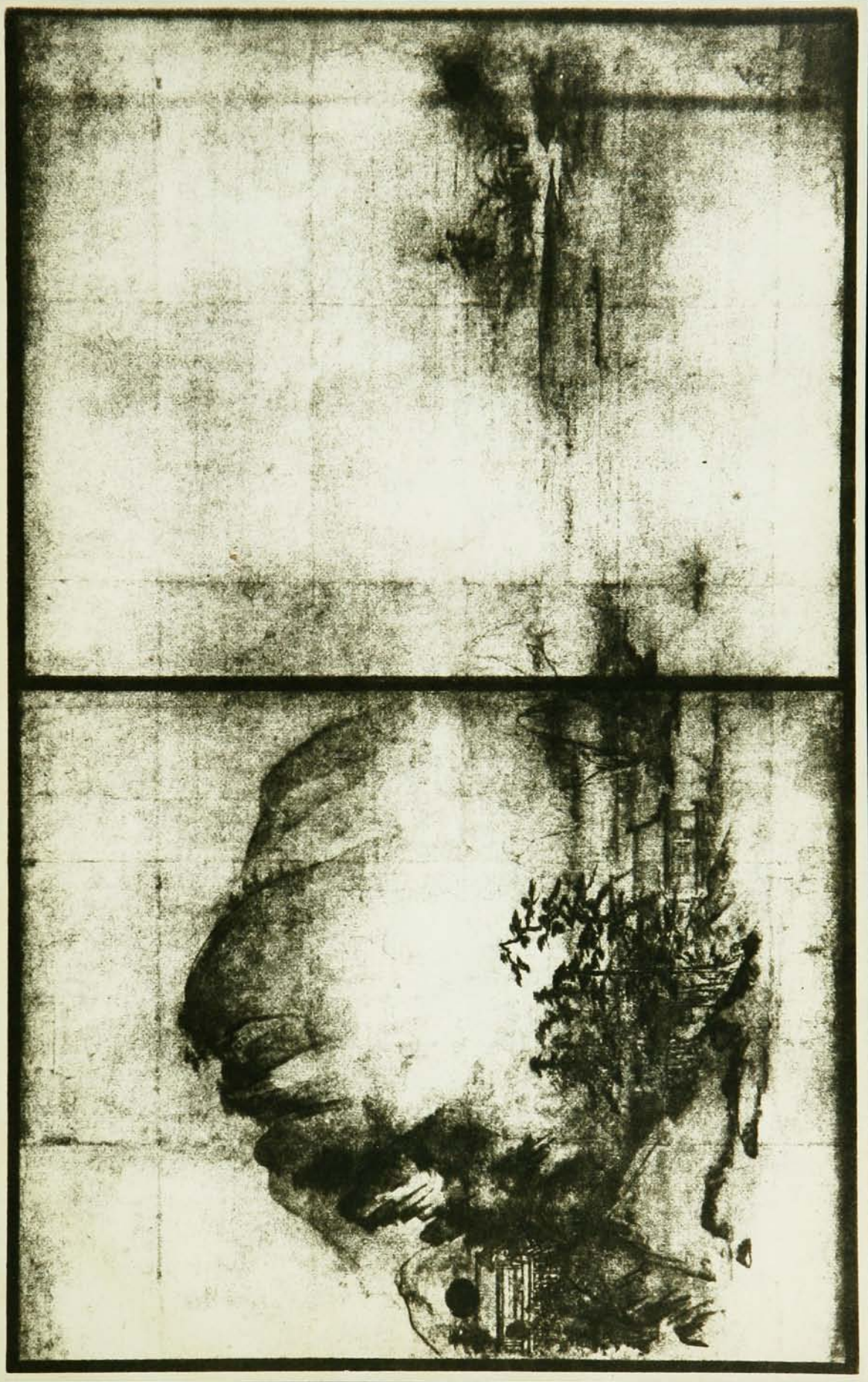
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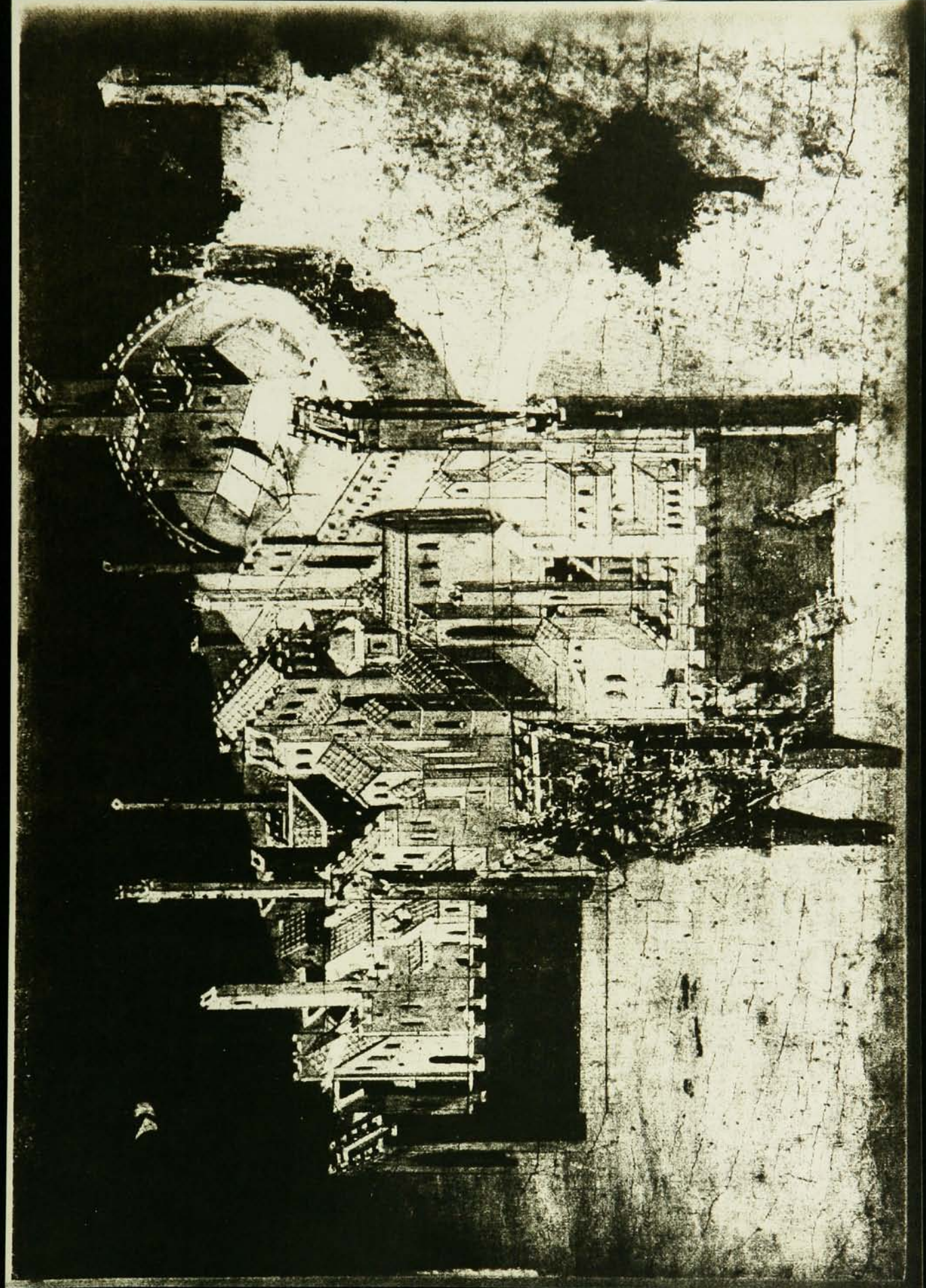
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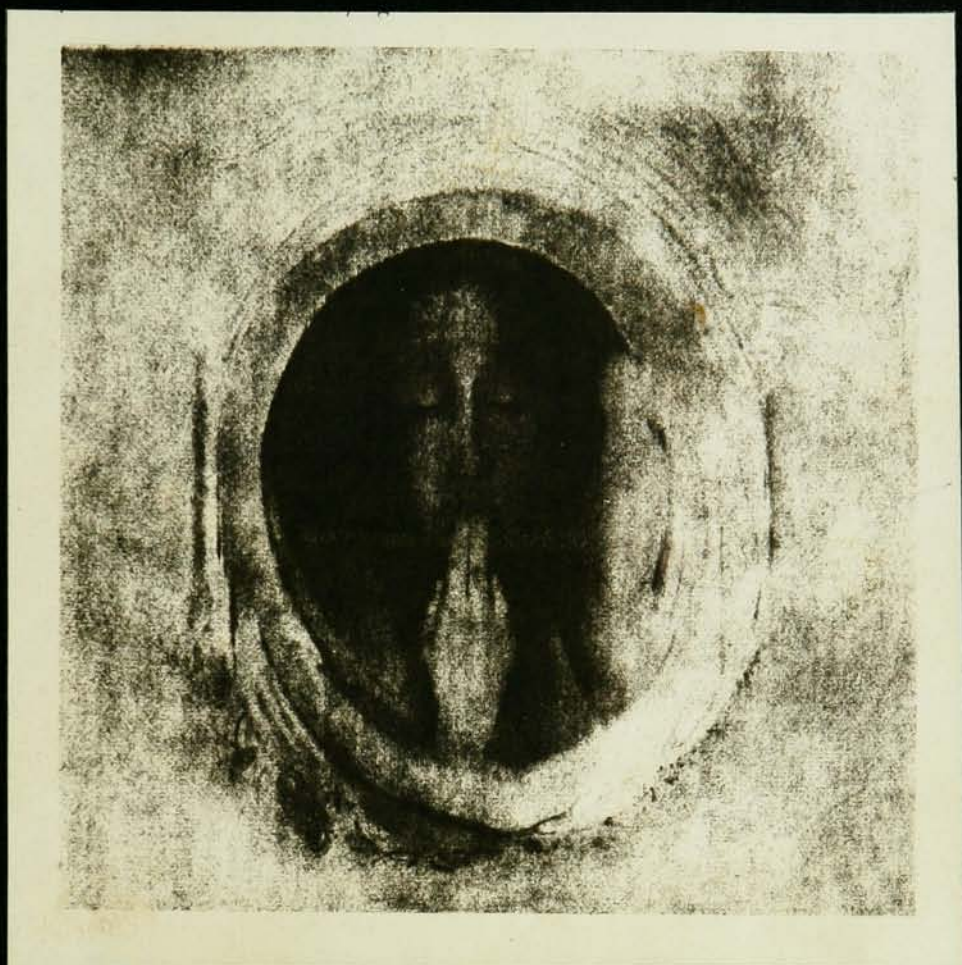
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Morris Davidson: Still Life with Fish

STEAMER IN A SNOW STORM

